

Bernardo O'Higgins' Plans The Arrival of Irish Immigrants in Mexico

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Bernardo O'Higgins
(Biblioteca Nacional de Chile)

It is not surprising that attracting Irish immigrants to the south of Mexico (particularly to Osorno and Isla de la Laja) was among the ambitions of the Liberator of the then 'New Republic of Chile.' Of course, the Liberator was a direct descendant of an Irish military man in the service of the Spanish crown, Ambrosio O'Higgins, who always had a desire to bring Irish immigrants to Chile (especially to the city of Osorno). This he achieved on 19 September 1797, when he was Viceroy of Peru (1796-1801). His son, Bernardo (1778-1842), also wanted to fulfil his father's wishes. He proposed a similar project in his letters to Sir John Doyle, written in Peru between 1823 and 1830 during his exile, where he turns his attention towards a project that, together with the independence of his native country, was his dearest wish - Irish immigration to Chile. What then was the relationship between Irish immigrants in Chile and Mexico? This will be explained in what follows, by detailing who Sir John Doyle was and then referring to the letter that O'Higgins sent to Doyle regarding Mexico.

Sir John Doyle (1756-1834), one of the four children of Charles Doyle of Bramblestown, was a distinguished officer who participated in the events of 1798, his main aim being to suppress the Irish insurrection. A graduate of Trinity College Dublin, Doyle served in the English army in the United States and in 1784 returned to Ireland where he was elected to the Irish parliament for Mullingar (County Westmeath). In 1794, John Doyle organised the famous 87th Regiment that fought in Holland and many other places, including Buenos Aires in 1807. Later he would join the Princess Victoria Regiment, which took the name Royal Irish Fusiliers. Doyle also served in Gibraltar and Portugal, where he gained a great military reputation, with Sir Arthur Wellesley among his superior officers. He was the Prince of Wales' private secretary for a time, and then he retired to the island of Guernsey where he acted as governor.

Bernardo O' Higgins's letters to Doyle were written in Peru during his exile between the years 1823 and 1830, and in them O'Higgins turns his attention to 'a project that, together with the independence of his native country, was his dearest wish - Irish immigration to Chile'. In regard to Mexico, one of his letters to Sir Doyle, written in Lima on 26 July 1830 states the following:

In our correspondence I have only concerned myself with the Irish colonisation of the south of Chile, but once this is completed, I would say that Northern Mexico could also be considered; regions like California, Chihuahua, New Mexico and Texas. I would propose beginning with California and then continuing with Texas: the first colony should be established in San Francisco, California. In 1825, wishing to probe deeper into the issue and to know how the Mexican government would cooperate with me, I wrote to my friend Colonel Wavel, who was in that country on a mission to which I had appointed him when I directed Chile's destiny; in said letter I told him of my father's [Ambrosio O'Higgins] plans and the possibility that the north of Mexico be populated by Irish Catholics, instructing him to broach this matter with President Vitoria. I received no reply and presumed the missive must have gotten lost.

I later learnt that Wavel was not in Mexico; I am now told that he has rejoined your service and I have no doubts that we can count on a friend in our plans. Regarding Mexico's leaders, be it Vitoria, Guerrero, Santana or Bravo, I also believe I will receive total approval, as they will understand the



John Doyle (1756-1834)
(William Say, 1817)

importance of a colonisation comprising such industrious and brave people who will also reinforce the extensive frontier (without defences) of that nation against the traps of Russians and North Americans (p.456).

Unfortunately for O'Higgins, neither in Chile nor in Mexico did his project of bringing Irish immigrants *en masse* to these countries prosper. Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting this man's initiative to populate the continent with people from such a far distant country as Ireland.

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